

Meat Inspection: Why The Fuss?



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As children we used to go with our parents to the grocery store where there were lots of fascinating things to look at. There was the vacuum tube tester to which our father would bring a bag of tubes from the radio or TV set every time it didn't work. One by one he would put each tube in the proper socket and push the button until he found the tube

that was causing the failure.

There was the candy section that captured our interest; our parents quickly moved past all of the delicious possibilities.

At the meat counter there was a wide array of offerings. Prominently displayed on the meat cuts was the USDA shield, our guarantee that the meat was inspected by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). This shield assured our parents that it was safe to feed that meat to their children.

It was comforting to know that someone in addition to the slaughter house personnel had inspected the meat to determine that it was safe. This seal took on added importance to us when, as teenagers, we read Upton Sinclair's early twentieth century expose of the packing industry, "The Jungle."

Today our meat still says "USDA Inspected and Passed," but much of the actual inspection is done by employees of the packers as the direct role of USDA inspectors has been significantly reduced.

Last year, more than 34 million pounds of beef were recalled for E. coli contamination, driving one firm out of business. Smaller recalls were issued for product mislabeling, product contamination, and failure to list potential allergens in processed items.

This winter the USDA, by withdrawing its inspectors, forced the recall of 143 million pounds of beef by the Westland/Hallmark Meat Co., a firm that supplies meat to school lunch programs and other USDA nutrition programs.

The trigger for the recall of that much beef was a video filmed by the Humane Society of the United States that showed employees of Westland/Hallmark using fork lifts, cattle prods, and high pressure water spray to get downer cattle on their feet before they were slaughtered. These were animals that were standing when the USDA inspector saw them upon receipt at the plant.

Any animal that goes down after the initial in-

spection is supposed to be reinspected to make sure that it was physical injury and not disease that caused it to go down. This was not done at Westland/Hallmark.

The news coverage focused on animal abuse and the mistreatment of the animals by the employees when from a food safety perspective, the health problem is that downer animals are more likely to be carrying BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy – mad cow disease) than ambulatory animals.

While animal abuse should not be tolerated, the recall was not focused on the issue of animal treatment, but rather on the potential safety of the food. The partial ban on the use of downer cattle is the first line of defense against BSE. The second line is the removal of all special risk material from the meat that is sold. In this case the first line of defense was partially breached—thus the recall of 143 million pounds of beef.

In response to this incident C. Larry Pope, chief executive of Smithfield Foods, the nation's fifth-largest beef packer and the number 1 processor of pork recently said, "Every time an incident like this happens, it hurts everybody...[consumers] trust that USDA stamp a little bit less."

To date it appears the US consumers have seen the first BSE case in Mabton, Washington and subsequent recalls as random events. As a result US beef consumption has not fallen in response to the discovery of BSE in the US herd and E. coli in some ground beef.

Over the last several years, we have had a series of recalls and sickness because of E. coli being found in processed beef. The question Pope raised is a real one. When will the US consumer begin to believe that the problem is not random but systemic and what should be done to minimize the risk of that shift taking place?

At the present time, many US beef producers have made significant investment in herd improvement and quality assurance programs. They are dedicated to improving the tenderness and taste of the beef that is put on the consumer's plate in hopes of maintaining or increasing beef's share of the US animal protein market.

However, if the public comes to see the Westland/Hallmark and Topps (21.7 million pounds of last year's recall for E. coli) events as indicative of systemic problems in the packing industry, this investment by producers will be compromised.

Next week we will look at the changes that have taken place in the inspection of US meats over the last two decades and policy changes that have been suggested for the future. △